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AUTHOR Goodfellow, Marianne
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ABSTRACT

Data collected in 1981 from rural Pennsylvania were used to examine use of informal family and friendship networks and formal services as these relate to independent living among the elderly. Policymakers have tended to shift the burden of care from formal social services to informal helpers based mainly on studies of urban elderly. To show that the strategy now being pursued by policymakers may not be effective when considering rural elderly, a conceptual model was developed which incorporated exchange theory as the foundation for the existence of helping networks of the elderly. Findings did support previous research concerning the role of informal helpers. The rural sample had a high level of support from primary associates such as family (64.6%) and friends and neighbors (13.1%). A few of the respondents did receive help from the formal social services sector (11.4%). A prior hypothesis that friends and neighbors have replaced the family as caregivers for the elderly was not supported. Approximately 1/5 of those who got informal help, but not formal agency help, stated that they did not seek formal help because they perceived a deficiency in social services or they lacked information necessary to link with the appropriate agency. (BRR)

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Maintaining the Elderly in Their Own Homes: The Role of Helping Networks

Marianne Goodfellow

The Pennsylvania State University
Cooperative Extension Service
University Park, Pennsylvania

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The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

Department of Sociology

Maintaining the Elderly in Their Own Homes: The Role of Helping Networks

A Thesis in

Sociology

by

Marianne Goodfellow

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

August 1982

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Marianne Goodfellow
Marianne Goodfellow

PREFACE

This report is Chapter V, "Summary, Conclusion, Limitations and Suggestions" of a master's thesis completed in the Department of Sociology at The Pennsylvania State University in 1982. The data used in the thesis were collected in 1981 as part of Project No. 2441 of the Pennsylvania Agricultural Experiment Station. The purpose of this project (1980-84) is to examine use of informal family and friendship networks and formal services as these relate to independent living among the elderly. Data were also collected on health status, stress, and coping.

In early 1982, the findings from the 1981 Pennsylvania study were used in developing a questionnaire for a six-state regional study, Project No. NE-131. This project had basically the same objectives as the Pennsylvania project. The six states involved in the regional project are Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and West Virginia. The data for the regional project were collected from a sample of 900 older persons in the six states in the fall of 1982.

Further findings from the Pennsylvania study are available, and findings from both the Pennsylvania and regional projects will be published through 1984. Inquires about the two projects may be directed to Charles O. Crawford or Rex H. Warland, Professors of Rural Sociology, Weaver Building, University Park, Pennsylvania 16802.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS

Summary

Previous research indicates that elderly persons have viable helping networks. Because of this, policymakers would shift the burden of care from formal social services to informal helpers. In addition, they assume that social services will be sought out by the elderly person, or by the elder's family, when needs arise. This strategy is mainly based on studies of urban elderly with little or no consideration given to the unique situation of rural elderly and the problems of rural living. Such an approach may lead to cases of unnecessary institutionalization (Pegels, 1981; Wan, 1980) among rural elderly. The purpose of this thesis was to ascertain the role of helping networks in maintaining the rural elderly in their own homes.

In order to show that the strategy now being pursued by policymakers may not be effective when considering rural elderly, a conceptual model was developed. The model incorporated exchange theory as the foundation for the existence of helping networks of the elderly. In addition, middle-range theoretical explanations for the low utilization of social services by the elderly, and for the diffusion of information about available social services, were incorporated into the model. Several hypotheses were developed which enabled testing of various parts of the model; other parts were given support by past research.

The findings of this research do support previous research concerning the role of informal helpers. The rural sample studied had a high level of support from primary associates such as family and friends and neighbors (64.6 and 13.1 percent, respectively). In addition, a few of the respondents did receive help from the formal social service sector (11.4 percent). However, the majority of help is provided by the family of these rural elderly. This finding does not support the hypothesis proposed by Pilisuk and Minkler (1980) that friends and neighbors have replaced the family as caregivers for the elderly--at least in the two rural areas studied.

The task areas in which primary groups provide help varies and seems to depend on the involvement and knowledge, needed to perform the task. For example, friends and neighbors were called upon most to provide transportation help, a relatively intermittent commitment. Family members were called upon most often for household tasks which are regularly recurring in nature. Social service agencies were used most often in the health care area. This latter finding indicates that formal social services are needed for particular tasks which some informal networks cannot provide, due to the lack of appropriate resources.

When the issue of recurring or long-term care is involved, one must ask whether enough "energy" is available from informal helpers to meet all needs (Gallo, 1981). Findings show that a significant proportion of those elderly who had informal help received help from only one person (32.8 percent). Data to determine whether the helper feels overburdened with care is not available at this time. However, the potential for overburdening the individual helper is indicated by past research

(Sussman, 1976). The remainder of respondents receiving help from informal sources receive help from two or more persons (67.2 percent). Even though these respondents have more than one helper, there remains the potential for overburdening the network if one or more members is unable to continue the provision of care.

Past research has indicated that mutual exchange between helper and help recipient are necessary in order to insure the viability of the social support network. Each individual needs to feel that they give and receive in some balanced fashion. Findings from this research indicate that reciprocity is an integral part of the helper/helpee relationship. Seventy-six percent of those receiving informal help from family members reciprocated, 65 percent reciprocated the help provided by friends and neighbors, and 44 percent of the respondents reciprocated the services provided by a paid helper. The pervasiveness of this reciprocity, even among those with health-related limitations, gives credibility to exchange as the foundation of support systems.

The analysis has shown that there are several factors which may determine the ability of an elder's helping network to provide adequate care. These factors include: (1) whether the viability of the network depends on a few key individuals, (2) whether individuals within the informal helping networks have the skills needed to provide all types of care, and (3) whether a network is available to provide long-term care. These factors indicate that the relationship between informal helping networks and independent living of the elderly must be thoroughly examined before a policy of strengthening networks can be advocated. It may be necessary to determine the "strengths" of individual families on a case-by-case basis.

Some have argued (Sussman, 1977) that when any of the above factors arise the elderly person will become linked with the appropriate social service agency. Past research has proposed that the values held by the elderly, particularly the value of independence, contributed to the low utilization of formal social services (i.e., nonlinkage of the elderly with formal social services) and that these values were due to a cohort effect. In other words, different age groups would hold different values about services, with the older generations having the most negative values concerning social services (Moen, 1978). The data from this research did not support the hypothesis that rural elderly do not make use of social services because they want to maintain their independence. However, results did show that the majority of those who got help, but not social service help, felt they did not need the formal sector. Findings indicate that these individuals had informal sources of help. However, approximately one fifth of those who got informal help, but not agency help, stated that they did not seek formal help because they perceived a deficiency in social services or they lacked the information necessary to link with the appropriate agency. For example, some respondents indicated that: (1) services were too far away, (2) services did not exist for their particular problem, (3) there was a fear of invasion of privacy, (4) there was a great deal of red tape, or (5) they were unaware of available services. The implication is that some elderly may have used social services had it not been for a lack of information or inappropriate information suggesting that the linkage process does not always operate. In addition, the formal social services offered may be inadequate to meet needs or inaccessible to these rural elderly.

Previous studies on the diffusion of information had indicated that personal contact played the biggest role in informing people about available community services. A majority of the respondents in this study who used social services pointed out that they found out about the service by means of a personal contact. Mass media does play a minor role in informing the elderly about available services but it clearly does not reach everyone who needs services. These findings on the importance of knowledge and mass media lend support to their inclusion in the model presented.

Conclusions

Past research indicates that the majority of elderly are able to live independent lives in their community (Ferleger, 1980; O'Brian and Wagner, 1980). The main objective of this research was to determine the role helping networks play in maintaining rural elderly in their own homes. Results showed that help was provided by both informal and formal networks with a number of the respondents activities of daily living. This help was based on an exchange of goods and services among the helper and helpee. It is not clear whether this help was necessary for the elderly respondents to live in their own homes. Further analysis is needed to determine why the elderly person needed help.

Because the informal helping network plays such an important role, policymakers are now aiming to shift the burden of care from the formal service sector to the informal helping network of the elderly. Another objective of this research was to determine whether such an approach was feasible with rural elderly. Two factors were examined which leads this researcher to advocate caution in placing the burden of care on informal networks.

First, the informal network may not have the resources necessary to provide all the care needed by an elderly person. This is suggested by the finding that most social service help was provided in the health area. This may be due to the lack of skills informal network members have in dealing with health-related problems.

Second, the informal network may "break-down" due to a lack of mental, emotional, or physical energy in meeting all the needs of an elderly person. This stems from the small size of some informal networks. More research is needed to determine whether quantity of care is really an important factor in determining whether elderly person's can remain in their homes.

The final objective of this research was to ascertain whether the informal networks of the elderly facilitate or impede use of social services. Findings indicate that an elderly person may not make contact with the formal sector when such services are needed. This may be due to a lack of appropriate information, a perceived problem in services delivered, or services not being available. Another finding showed that the majority of those using formal services heard about them by means of personal contact. It may be that those who lack appropriate information do not have informal networks that are able to properly inform the elderly person about available services. Due to data limitations, no evidence is available at this time which would enable this researcher to determine how values impede or facilitate use of services.

From the conceptual framework on maintaining the elderly dealt with in this thesis, and the relevant findings which supported this framework, several recommendations can be made. First, informal helpers who provide significant amounts of care to an older person should not be

left without support, either from informal or formal sources. To accomplish this, informal helpers should be provided with respite services which would relieve the physical and emotional demands on caregivers (Danis, 1978). In addition, educational and support programs should be initiated to make caring for an older person less of a burden. These programs might include: (1) training to deal with certain kinds of health problems, (2) giving the helpers information about available social services in order that they may be sought out when needed, and (3) providing support for the emotional strains of being a helper of an elderly person. The elderly themselves should be informed of possibilities for exchange with their formal and informal helpers in order to alleviate the burden of unwanted dependency. Finally, the formal service sector should be available to "step in" when the informal network can no longer provide care for the older person. This might be in the form of long-term, in-home care for the elderly.

In order to accomplish this goal, a comprehensive campaign needs to be initiated to inform the elderly and their informal networks about available formal services. Community outreach programs as well as more comprehensive mass media coverage needs to be implemented. Research is needed on what would be the most effective technique when dealing with rural elderly.

A second recommendation is, that in a time of restricted resources the solution need not be to require the informal networks to assume the burden of care for an older person. If a network approach is applied to the formal service sector, coordination and resource exchange among human service organizations would avoid costly duplication of services and would better serve the individual in the community (Sarason, 1977).

Third, policy decisions for those in rural areas can no longer be made based on urban samples. The relative costs of delivering services to urban and rural areas must be determined so that adequate services can be made to include the rural elderly.

Finally, policy now instituted should be future oriented so that younger age cohorts will not be faced with the restricted options now available to the rural elderly. In addition, recognizing differences in the needs of age cohorts with respect to health, for example, may create a more effective social service delivery system (Coward, 1971).

Methodological Issues, Limitations, and Suggestions

Several limitations should be kept in mind before generalizing the findings of this study to other populations. First, since the sample was selected by means of systematic sampling from published telephone directories there is an omission of those who did not have a phone or had moved since the directory was published, and those who intentionally had unlisted numbers. A better method of random sampling would be to obtain a complete list of all elderly persons in the areas to be sampled and systematically sample from these lists. However, complete lists are difficult to obtain, and the method tends to be slower and more expensive than the telephone method.

Second, a basic assumption of the network analysis approach is that behavior cannot be explained in terms of any single relation. Methodological problems arise when specific relations are treated independently of other relations (Boissevain and Mitchell, 1973). For example, the analyses used for this thesis is based on a partialling of the individual's total network. A helping network is a partial network in which

individual network members perform particular functions or tasks (e.g., housecleaning) for the elderly person. Ideally, effective network analysis must account for the individual's total network from which a subset of relations, operationally defined, is examined (McAllister and Fischer, 1978). But, the difficulty in obtaining complete networks is monumental and very expensive. The techniques involved do not lend themselves to large samples. Intensive study of a few people, in a bounded community, is recommended.

A third limitation is that only the individual's "perceived" environment has been examined. There is some indication that network studies based only on self-reports are less reliable than research which gathers information from primary associates (O'Brien and Wagner, 1980). In addition, there is disagreement among researchers as to whether respondents can accurately recall their networks and whether informant's reports of their communications bear any resemblance to their actual communications (Hammer, 1980a,1980b; Killworth and Bernard, 1980). The regional study will seek out primary helpers in order to validate the older person's perception. In addition, the perceptions of the helper as they relate to the issue of overburdening will be assessed.

The fourth limitation arises when dichotomizing the concept of formal and informal in the analyses. In principle there are clear differences, but in actual practice the distinction diminishes. Dichotomizing can seriously distort the concept of client-provider interaction and inhibits planning for more effective services. For example, a social service worker may be or become a friend of the help recipient. This may be especially true in rural areas. Because of this distortion,

concepts of network analysis need to be refined based upon the actual behavior of client and provider. This will enable researchers to better describe the complexity of relations and to better understand the nature and impact of services upon both providers and recipients of services (Meyers, 1979). Because conventional research in the area of network analysis dichotomizes relationships into formal and informal categories, present research followed convention so as to be comparable with past research.

There are some limitations of the interview scheulde, several of which involve the following. First, information about those elderly who did not receive help was not obtained. Questions should have been asked as to whether the person needed help and whether they were aware of any social services. Second, the question dealing with the quality of the services provided by helpers (e.g., How satisfied are you with the help (name) gives you?) was not an adequate measure in that it did not transcend the norms which leads a person to say they are satisfied for any help received. More subtle behavioral questions need to be developed to move beyond the norms. Finally, questions dealing with the proximity of helpers, whether or not the respondent had children, and exact location of the person with respect to the nearest town (e.g., how far, in miles, the respondent resides from town) were not included in the interview schedule and could be helpful. These problems will be dealt with in the regional study.

In spite of these limitations, it is believed that this study has made a significant contribution to understanding the complex issue of independent living among elderly persons.

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